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U.S.-SOVIET FRICTION grows over private talks to ease tensions.

The two sides dispute the current talks' significance; analysts detect an election-year propaganda war. Moscow is peeved by a Shultz statement touting "private diplomatic discussions" to seek possible accord on arms control and other issues. The Soviets claim Shultz spreads false optimism. They deny that a private meeting in Moscow between Gromyko and U.S. Ambassador Hartman made any progress.

The Reagan administration, with eyes on the election, wants to make relations seem better than they are. A top official insists the quiet discussions are continuing "to see if he can solve some of these problems." Moscow tries to paint a bleak picture—for fear that any appearance of progress might only help Reagan's reelection chances.

Many U.S. officials doubt any breakthrough on nuclear-arms issues this year. But the Soviets will have to deal with Reagan next year if he is re-elected.